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## Skywatchers, shamans, and kings

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Skywatchers, Shamans, and Kings: Astronomy and the Archaeology of Power by E. C. Krupp

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years" (p. 32) and uncritically reproduces the Comtean hierarchy that deems astronomy to be "the most general science" and physics "the most basic science" (pp. 43–44). One might also wish that Zebrowski had included more material on particular classes of disasters, such as volcanoes, and had better integrated the historical vignettes and the engineering lessons.

The emphasis of the book is clearly on the science of disaster mitigation. As Zebrowski says in his preface, "What I offer . . . is some (hopefully thoughtful) perspectives on a selection of historical natural disasters, the scientific progress that has been made in understanding them, the scientific challenges that remain, the socioeconomic factors that influence what scientific questions may be pursued in the future, and the prospects for achieving a level of scientific understanding that may someday permit us to predict, and ideally mitigate, natural disasters" (p. x).

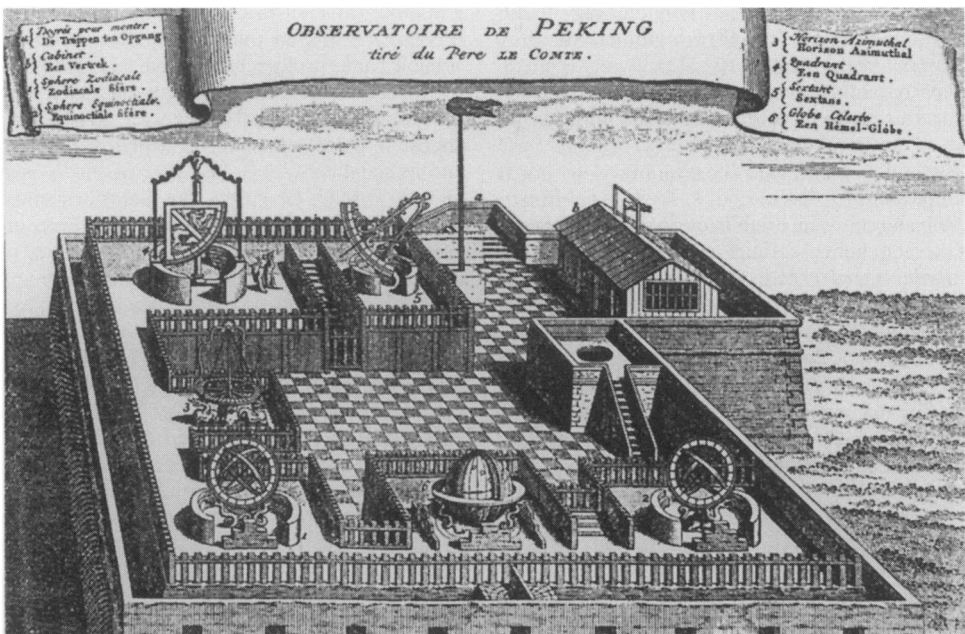
*Perils of a Restless Planet* could be used in a general science course on natural disasters. It might also stimulate active interest in the historical, social, and scientific dimensions of the major upheavals of nature.

JAMES R. FLEMING

## ■ Antiquity

**E. C. Krupp.** *Skywatchers, Shamans, and Kings: Astronomy and the Archaeology of Power.* xiv + 364 pp., illus., bibl., index. New York/Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1997. \$27.95.

E. C. Krupp's latest book is an easygoing travelogue that takes the reader along a zigzag course through cultures, lands, and millennia, encompassing a goodly sample of the 1,300 ancient sites he has visited and some others. It is illustrated largely by photographs of a high quality, many of them taken by the author and his family, some of them well off the beaten track. Our guide is a writer with a voracious appetite for all that might have a bearing on the sky, but he avoids the common pitfall of overlooking terrestrial phenomena. He knows moderation too in matters of divination, noting that a quarter of Babylonian divination texts are astrological—which is to say that three-quarters are not. The biblical Daniel's powers were distinct from those of a reader of the sky, but this distinction should alert us to the hazards of linking power and astronomical knowledge, as Krupp wishes to do.



*The Beijing Observatory as illustrated in Ferdinand Verbiest's *Astronomia Europaea* (1687) (reprinted in Krupp, *Skywatchers, Shamans, and Kings*).*

He has no difficulty in persuading us that the rulers of many ancient peoples, from the Aztecs to the Mongols, built monuments somehow related to the sky, but when he claims that prehistoric peoples thus harnessed the power of the sky to their own power-orientated ends, he needs evidence that is rarely available and never unambiguous. It is here, rather than in his far-reaching descriptive accounts, that he leaves the promise of his subtitle unfulfilled.

The book has a serious thesis, as that subtitle intimates, but it is one for which close argument is almost entirely absent. In a popular book of this sort one does not expect to find extensive reference to the ideas of Max Weber or Lord Acton, of Hobbes or of Hume, but as sociological discussions of the shifting concept of power are very numerous, it would not be unreasonable to ask that any argument touching on this perennial theme be more tightly knit and less reliant on lapidary one-liners. Astronomical knowledge confers power; but so do all forms of knowledge, if we define power loosely enough. Krupp offers a repeated but unfulfilled promise that the nature of the relationship between power and the sky will be laid bare, but on close inspection it dissolves into the mists. It involves, we are told, "the concepts of sacred landscape, mythic origins, and cosmovision" (p. 13); "people wouldn't build astronomically tuned pyramids and cosmic cities, and they wouldn't elevate rulers to the top of a social pyramid, if centralized power weren't useful" (p. 311). A reader might feel that, taken element by element, these statements contain more than a grain of truth, as indeed they do, but it is the chain of argument that is wanting. Often the very meaning of the text is impenetrable: "Ideology . . . legitimizes leadership and status by establishing a clear connection between human affairs and the cosmos as a whole. If society reflects the character of the universe, it can be regarded as an inherent element of nature. It is, after all, endorsed by the gods. Canny interaction with the gods invests the ruler with their patronage, and the successful ruler works out an ideological mechanism to pump divine will through the chain of command. . . . Ideas are the negotiable currency in the marketplace of power, and the sky is where the gods do most of their high-end business" (pp. 311–312). Perhaps the fault is mine, but the only parts of this all-too-general passage that I feel I can understand are open to exception in historical times, so why not in prehistory?

Krupp is, to be sure, a master of demotic style. He knows how to catch his readers' attention, whether with headlines ("Upward Mobility," "It

Pays to Advertise," "Within the Womb of Mother Earth") or simply by bringing the world of stuffy scholarship down to earth, as in his transformation of the Japanese "August Heavenly Alarming Female" into a stripper topping heaven's hit parade, "a celestial centerfold and calendar girl for the beginning of time." Whether he loses anything in the act of demystifying the past by making comparisons with such phenomena of the modern world as Walt Disney or comic book superheroes is open to discussion. Painted Rock may rise "like the largest vulva on the planet out of the Carrizo Plain" (Krupp is usually much more coy), but the meaning of even such a fundamental human characteristic has changed so much since the putative establishment of the rock in question that this kind of joking language obscures rather than helps understanding.

It is not that Krupp is guilty of serious sleight of hand, however, let alone of dogmatism. On the contrary, he usually manages to pass responsibility for his interpretations to those who first presented them: "No less an authority than the Smithsonian Institution," "Vogt judged," "some researchers think," "Marco Polo saw." (On the last point one might have added "according to some.") Whereof one cannot speak, thereof it is no doubt wise to be silent; but the weighing of evidence is surely also a task for a writer of even a popular book such as this. And when he dismisses other writers out of hand, it is not unreasonable for us to expect more than a simple statement that they make a "dubious assertion burdened by equivocal evidence," Krupp's response to the interpretation of the Great Pyramid and its neighbors by Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert. Perhaps he is right, but that is beside the point. As he shows often enough elsewhere, incidentally, Krupp has nothing against stars, or even against Orion's belt.

There can be no doubt that this imaginative and readable work by a widely read and widely traveled author will strike a chord in the minds of a great many modern readers. It should certainly appeal to people who promote the New Age, although it has to be said that it makes no concessions whatsoever to them. One of its most interesting sections concerns costume as an element in shamanism, and it is one that might even have been extended to include American West Coast cultures of the 1990s.

The book is certainly a mine of interesting oddments of information. Its greatest structural weakness remains, throughout, the loose association of its components. Even more serious: by its way of darting around in time and space it

sports a kind of unspoken argument by juxtaposition. Discussing post-circles from the Old and New Worlds side by side is, to say the least, dangerous, and it is not enough to add by way of insurance the comment that you can “take cross-cultural comparisons too far.” The meaning of symbolism from Newgrange (Ireland) must elude us, we are told, because there was no writing in prehistory; but Celtic legend is not long in entering the Irish story. There are stairways on ziggurats and, in the same sentence, stairways in China; and there are Mother Earth interpretations of figures from Malta and of others from Anatolia, all closely associated on the same page. And even in matters that concern the “archaeology of power,” there is the occasional slide from powers in nature to human power. There are perhaps connections, but they are not self-evident, and they need more justification than they get here.

J. D. NORTH

**G. E. R. Lloyd.** *Adversaries and Authorities: Investigations into Ancient Greek and Chinese Science.* (Ideas in Context, 42.) xviii + 250 pp., figs., bibl., index. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. \$54.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

In this study G. E. R. Lloyd considers the conditions under which one might compare ancient Greek and Chinese science, the methods one might use, what kinds of questions one might ask, and what the answers might look like. Lloyd writes with his customary care and scholarship, telling us when he is being speculative, listing actual and potential arguments for and against each thesis he argues, and guiding us through or past methodologies of social construction and mentalities. I intend it wholly as a compliment when I say that he writes like a magisterial medieval schoolman with his fingers on the minutiae of scholarship and his hands on fundamental questions on a topic that looks to an old-fashioned historian of science faintly unreal.

But historical reality is what Lloyd brings to it. The book is also a personal intellectual adventure into the difficult field of Chinese language and history. To make meaningful comparisons between the Greeks and Chinese, Lloyd is obliged to return to basic questions of the history of science. Deliberately posing them in a naive form, Lloyd catches the assumptions that have underlain the working methods of many historians of both Greek and Chinese science. Insofar as science represents physical truth, why

was it not the same in Greece and China? Insofar as it is culturally determined, how could there be any similarities? These are the Disputed Questions with which Lloyd starts and finishes. Necessarily he gives much attention to methodology: finding questions that can be usefully asked of Chinese science is a salutary exercise in rethinking the history of Western science. Lloyd's earlier work now looks complementary, and the turn to China natural.

The book is suitably enough concerned with general questions rather than with case histories, although Lloyd does provide some detail in the case of mathematics (the test case for social construction), the structure of the body, and “heavenly harmonies.” I find myself most in sympathy with Lloyd's discussion of the use of “science” to convince, whether the judicial panels or rival philosophers in Greece or the emperor and his advisers in China. Convincing people meant talking about such topics as principles, causes, and proofs and about how many smaller things reflected the order of the cosmos. I am not in sympathy with continuing to use the word “science”—or, worse, “scientist”—in connection with the ancient period. Lloyd sees the problem but also sees a convenience in the words; we can, however, profitably discuss separate activities, like looking at the heavens or at the body, without imagining that they somehow came under the same umbrella and without confusing “science” with philosophy.

In short, another valuable book from Lloyd: a Janus with a mature face toward Greece instructing a new face toward China.

ROGER FRENCH

**Hippocrates.** *Hippocrate: Airs, eaux, lieux.* Volume 2, Part 2. Edited and translated by **Jacques Jouanna.** (Collection des Universités de France.) 375 pp., figs., index. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1996.

Hippocrates' *Airs, Waters, and Places*, traditionally considered one of the best texts among the Hippocratic corpus, is a major work in the history of medicine. Thus the publication of Jacques Jouanna's fine edition and translation is a welcome event. Even if it is impossible to determine whether Hippocrates himself was the author of *Airs, Waters, and Places*, Jouanna argues that it is an authentic text, composed by a single author of the Hippocratic school, around 430 B.C. In spite of a lacuna, it is clear that the text we have, in its organization and details, is, fortunately, not too far from the original one.